



The London Journal

A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present

ISSN: 0305-8034 (Print) 1749-6322 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yldn20>

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To cite this article: Julia Bush (1980) East London Jews and the First World War, The London Journal, 6:2, 147-161, DOI: [10.1179/ldn.1980.6.2.147](https://doi.org/10.1179/ldn.1980.6.2.147)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/ldn.1980.6.2.147>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



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East London Jews and the First World War

JULIA BUSH

‘THE Hebrew colony, unlike any other alien colony in the land, forms a solid and permanently distinct block – a race apart, as it were, in an enduring island of extraneous thought and custom.’¹ So wrote Major Evans-Gordon, Conservative M.P. for Stepney, at the height of the disquiet and mounting prejudice which preceded the 1905 Aliens Act. In the same year, 45,000 East London signatures were claimed by the British Brothers League for their anti-Jewish manifesto.² Although by 1914 organised anti-semitism was in abeyance, partly owing to the Act’s success in reducing new arrivals, there was a grave danger that the outbreak of war would revive and accentuate old fears and suspicions. If some fragile progress had been made towards acceptance, integration still remained a prediction for the future rather than a fact of the present.

The East London ghetto could be defined geographically. It extended from Aldgate Pump in the west to Jubilee Street, Jamaica Street and Stepney Green in the east, with approximate southern and northern boundaries at Cable street and at the Great Eastern Railway tracks.³ Though gentile families lived within this area, and though Jewish outposts were to be found beyond it (in the Mile End and Bow Roads, and even as far afield as Ilford), the overwhelming majority of Jewish immigrants chose to remain within this square mile of Stepney, and to make it their own. It is hard to be precise about their numbers. The 1911 census recorded the presence of 28,661 Russians and 17,748 Poles in the borough. To these must be added a proportion of the 5347 Germans and Austrians, and many thousands of young Jews from foreign families who were English by birth. In 1900 Toynbee Hall investigators put the total East London Jewish population at around 100,000⁴ It seems certain that this figure had been reached by 1914.

The most obvious feature which cut the Jews off from their English neighbours was their use of the Yiddish language. Whitechapel boasted no less than four daily Yiddish newspapers.⁵ Despite dialect variations which reflected divisions of culture and nationality among the ghetto inhabitants, Yiddish was a unifying factor because it was universally understood. The same, of course, was true of the Jewish religion. There were 35 East London synagogues in 1914.⁶ Israel Zangwill’s novels vividly convey the social importance of religion: even for the less *froom* it provided a sense of security and order in the midst of a life full of difficulties. A formidable apparatus of religious education perpetuated Jewish beliefs and knowledge of Hebrew. Though only 20 per cent or so of Jewish children went to Jewish-controlled schools, at least 16 state schools in East London observed Jewish holidays and offered instruction in Judaism.⁷ In addition, thousands of children attended religious classes in the evenings and at weekends.

The synagogues were at the centre of a network of community services which extended beyond religion and education to the provision of Jewish entertainment, food and even employment. No aspect of ghetto life was more disliked by neighbouring gentiles than its appearance of economic self-sufficiency. In the sweated trades Jews exploited fellow-Jews. English workers feared both the ambitious ruthlessness of Jewish employers and the apparent willingness of Jewish workers to tolerate low wages and bad conditions. Conditions in the East London workshop trades had changed little from those described in Charles Booth’s survey twenty years earlier. In the clothing trade, above all, cheap mass

London Journal 6, (2) 1980

production by sub-divided labour remained a profitable, if risky business. Despite several strikes, and the efforts of the anarchist Rudolf Rocker, it was proving as hard as ever to organise Jewish workers into strong, stable trade unions in 1914. The pressures of economic competition, seasonal unemployment and a seemingly endless supply of willing, unskilled labour defeated the attempts of Jewish activists and English trade unionists alike. Rocker's greatest success was his Jubilee Street club, formed in 1906. His lack of political dogmatism and his respect for the Yiddish language and traditions helped to make it the most popular alternative to the synagogues in the provision of education and organisation. British socialist groups failed to provide an effective counter-attraction, despite the number of political refugees among the East European immigrants. In their politics, as in so much else, the Jews remained 'a race apart' on the eve of the war.

To many English Jews the Whitechapel *stetl* seemed as foreign and as inward-looking as it did to the local gentiles. Since their failure to stem the first influx of Russo-Polish settlers in the 1880s, Anglo-Jewish philanthropists had pursued a double aim in East London. Co-religionists must be benevolently assisted but also, for the sake of the reputation of comfortably-established British Jews, anglicised as rapidly as possible. In July 1914 there was an uneasy awareness that the East London immigrants were a potential weak link in the solid front of Anglo-Jewish patriotism. It was feared – rightly – that any suggestion that Jews were not 'doing their bit' would be seized upon by anti-semites. 'War breeds the feeling of prejudice from which the Jew, placed as he is, is bound to be the keenest sufferer', warned a *Jewish Chronicle* editorial on 31 July. The same deep-seated feeling of insecurity produced the abrupt decision, once war had been declared, to brush aside earlier reservations about Jews fighting fellow-Jews, and to adopt a commanding new slogan: 'England has been all she could be to Jews, Jews will be all they can be to England.'⁸

Vigorous efforts were immediately made to promote pro-war views in East London. Success was not lacking in the early days. The *Chronicle* noted approvingly that among the crowds clamouring to join up outside the Whitechapel recruiting station were several hundred young Jews 'more English than the English in their expression of loyalty and desire for service'.⁹ A month later a special Jewish recruiting meeting at Camperdown House (Aldgate headquarters of the Jewish Lads Brigade) produced 150 immediate enlistments.¹⁰ This was the start of a propaganda campaign by the Jewish Recruiting Committee which brought many of the most distinguished British Jews to East London to urge its inhabitants that 'the responsibility and duty of the Jews was even greater than that of the Britisher, because it was their duty to fight for the liberty, justice and freedom they had in this land'.¹¹ By December 1914 nearly 300 old boys of the Jews Free School had enlisted. Stepney Jewish Lads Club had sent 107. Both the *East London Observer* and the *East London Advertiser* commented favourably on the fact that, relative to its size, the Jewish community was providing more than its fair share of volunteers.¹²

Even at the beginning of the war, however, such a picture of patriotic harmony is misleading. Many thousands of East London Jews turned a deaf ear to the recruiters. About half were ineligible because of their foreign nationality, and the majority of the rest shared their foreign inclinations and attitudes. Britain's quarrel with Germany did not concern them. The fact that Tsarist Russia was fighting alongside Britain was an added disincentive, and religious loyalty (despite the exhortations of English rabbis) seemed also to dictate non-involvement. Jewish internationalism was a living reality for immigrants who shared their ghetto with hundreds of German and Austrian Jews. British attitudes towards foreigners (or those who until recently had been foreigners) were also frequently

discouraging. Heightened patriotism went hand-in-hand with renewed xenophobia. The press use of the term 'German-Jew' encouraged popular confusion between 'enemy aliens' and other foreigners. The *East London Observer* was already sniffing out spies and saboteurs in Whitechapel, 'which has the unenviable distinction of accommodating more alien enemies than any other area in London'.¹³ Even naturalised British subjects felt unsafe, after a number of 'enemy' Jews had had their shops looted. The *Jewish Chronicle* described how, with a pathetic faith in legality, they clung to their papers 'as if life depended upon their preservation'. Some displayed the precious naturalisation or birth certificate in a window 'between the miniature flags of the allied nations'; others hid it in the synagogue for greater safety.¹⁴

Some of the worst cases of prejudice against foreigners occurred over the question of relieving economic distress. On the initiative of the Labour Party, a War Emergency Workers National Committee (W.N.C.) had been set up in the first days of the war to represent workers' interests nationally in the relief of war-time hardship. Complaints of anti-Jewish discrimination in East London soon began to reach the Committee. On 16 October, Fred Knee, of the London Trades Council, wrote to inform the W.N.C. of 'the curious manner in which Stepney of all places is behaving towards its distressed people who are not naturalised British subjects'.¹⁵ Though the Bethnal Green and Shoreditch relief committee were prepared to assist aliens, in Stepney all foreign Jews were being referred to the Jewish Board of Guardians. Soon after, a memorandum on the same issue from a Mr Cohen of the United Furnishing Trades Union arrived at the W.N.C. office.¹⁶ The transfer of Jewish cases had in fact been requested by the Board, and the practice had by now spread to other East London boroughs. Cohen explained the demeaning nature of the Jewish Board's investigative methods ('of such a character as to make applicants feel that they are begging'), and concluded forcefully that the handing over of relief to this Anglo-Jewish charity was 'a dangerous precedent'.

Since one of the main aims of the W.N.C. was to defend from Poor Law treatment workers suffering war-time distress, it is not surprising that its secretary, J. S. Middleton, lost no time in taking up such complaints. Ben Cooper, Jewish secretary of the Cigar Makers Union and a W.N.C. member, was asked to write a full report on discrimination, and on 21 November Middleton communicated to the national secretary of the Prince of Wales's relief fund his committee's demand for equal treatment for Jews.¹⁷ Further direct complaints from East London had been received in the mean time.¹⁸ Jewish trade unionists were being kept off Stepney war committees, though representatives of the Board of Guardians were welcomed (an example of anti-unionism, rather than anti-semitism, in fact). Jewish women were being refused work at the Stepney borough relief workshops. A carpenter who was a naturalised British subject was refused a government contract because he was Jewish. Some refusals may have resulted from misunderstanding, but the evidence suggests considerable hostility to assisting even friendly aliens, and Jews in general. The *Toynbee Record*, investigating Stepney unemployment in December 1914, confirmed this impression.¹⁹

The misguided patriotic zeal of Anglo-Jewish philanthropists actively encouraged discrimination. Minutes of a Jewish Board of Guardians' meeting on 31 August 1914 reveal that this body not only offered to take over a large slice of the local borough relief committee's work, by dealing with 'all cases of foreign Jews', but also proposed intervening in the assessment of relief payments to British Jews. In the following six weeks the Board's cases more than doubled, from 796 in the same period of 1913 to 1,832; the cost rose from £770 to £1716.²⁰ Wealthy Anglo-Jews were anxious to avoid accusations that

East London immigrants were a burden on Britain. But costs were so high, and Stepney Jews' opposition to transfer to the Board's care so strong, that eventually subscribers to the Guardians' funds questioned the wisdom of such policies.²¹ Other Jewish charities followed the Board's example at the beginning of the war. The Poor Jews Temporary Shelter assumed responsibility for all Jews who found themselves stranded in London as a result of the war. Within a few weeks the Shelter was filled to overflowing with Belgian Jewish refugees who had little hope of moving on after the usual 14-day permitted stay. After opening new premises in Poland Street and Great Alie Street, and running up a huge overdraft, the Shelter was eventually forced to appeal to the whole Jewish community for money and offers of hospitality. Under the Rothschilds' leadership £40,000 was raised between September 1914 and March 1915, and the refugee problem largely taken out of the hands of the East London organisation.²² Meanwhile the Jewish Soup Kitchen in Butler Street joined in the campaign to spare the British public's purse by undertaking to double its usual relief to the poor in the winter of 1914–15.²³ The Jewish Society for the Protection of Women and Girls tried to overcome the discriminatory policy of the Stepney borough workrooms by opening its own, exclusively for alien Jewish girls.²⁴

The East London press had a few perfunctory words of praise for Jewish philanthropy, but it is doubtful if it had any deep effect on local opinion, helping to combat anti-alien and anti-Jewish prejudice. During 1915 it became clear that the war would not be won easily. The *Lusitania* disaster in May brought the mounting hatred of the Huns to explosion point in East London. The three days of violence which followed were directed at Austrians and Germans (many of them Jews), but endangered all foreigners. The police stood by helplessly while angry mobs smashed and robbed their way through every East London borough. 'Most of the shops and houses were so ransacked that only the bare walls remained', reported the *Observer*.²⁵ The *Advertiser* warned that 'unless the movement can be speedily checked, shopkeepers of other than German nationality will be bound to suffer. It is difficult with so many foreign residents to make sure that a name which is Russian, Belgian, or Serbian, will not be mistaken for German.'²⁶ The following week, the columns of the East London press contained curious genealogical advertisements, demonstrating the pure Allied descent of shopkeepers with foreign-sounding names.

There was no repetition of the *Lusitania* riots. But prejudice against the East London Jewish population continued to grow. Towards the end of 1915 military service emerged as the most dominant issue separating the Jews from the native population, the more so because accusations of 'shirking' were linked with fears that aliens and their offspring were replacing British soldiers in jobs and businesses. Such fears were fuelled by the evidence of growing prosperity in the Jewish community. 'The working classes have had a more prosperous time than for many years past', reported the Jewish Board of Guardians at the end of 1915. Government contracts, especially for army uniforms, had solved the problem of unemployment and were offering even unskilled boy and girl workers the chance to earn 'abnormally high wages'.²⁷ Such reports did not go unnoticed by anti-semites. The *East London Observer* chose national registration, in July 1915, as the pretext for the first of what later became a continuous stream of anti-semitic editorials: 'A great deal has been said as to Jewish effort in the War, but there is a strong local feeling that the "Jew Boys", as they are termed, who hang about street corners and public houses, the cheap foreign restaurants and similar places, ought to be made to do something for the country they honour with their presence.'²⁸

The failure of the Derby recruitment scheme in Stepney focused further unfriendly attention on the Jews. In vain the Jewish Recruiting Committee requested War Office

permission 'to make a special canvass in the Stepney Borough in particular, and in East London generally'. In vain the *Jewish Chronicle* pointed to the still favourable overall total of Jews serving, and the honours they had won.²⁹ The *East London Observer* continued to accuse, and the local support for its accusations is clear from its correspondence columns. An anonymous Stepney councillor wrote: 'Since the war began I can honestly say that I have not come across a dozen Jewish soldiers. I have been told in many quarters that they are earning heaps of money in consequence of the shortage of men. If this is so, it is a despicable advantage to take, and the sooner it is brought to an end by conscription the better.'³⁰

Meanwhile the Military Service Bill was becoming law. The behaviour of Jewish applicants to the Stepney military tribunal soon provided a far more potent source of anti-semitic propaganda. The tribunal's first session resulted in 29 refusals out of 33 cases, and a mass of bad publicity for the Jewish community.³¹ Not only was doubt thrown on the honesty of the claims for exemption from conscription, but the attitude of both claimants and their supporters in the public gallery was disrespectful, and at times defiant. There were 'groans of protest' when one tribunal member suggested that an applicant's sister should be sent out to work to support the family in his absence: 'The application was refused amid cries of "Shame!" and "A disgrace!" from the public. The Mayor said he would have to order the public out if such scenes occurred again. A voice: "A great farce".' Such scenes – and worse – continued to occur at every sitting of the Stepney tribunal. The Mayor repeatedly put his threat into action. Since eviction of the public, could, by law, only be a temporary expedient, it failed to deter: 'As they went they uttered catcalls and whistled "Britons never shall be slaves"'. Some unseemly language was also used. Outside a number of constables were engaged in keeping the public at bay.' Later in the same session, angry tribunal members were goaded into the unwise step of swapping insults with the re-admitted audience.³² It was an undignified spectacle, calculated to damage the tribunal's reputation amongst the Jewish community, as well as the Jews' standing in the eyes of other East Londoners. The *East London Observer* could be relied upon to exaggerate every incident of disorder into an attack on the Jewish population as a whole. Its editorials fulminated against 'gross behaviour and obscene interruptions and unpatriotic displays' which 'might tempt one to suspect that German gold had been at work'.³³

Despite editorial hostility, verbatim reports of tribunal proceedings in the local press provide evidence of the true reasons for many Jews' unwillingness to serve. Appeals were most frequently made on economic grounds. But there were more specifically Jewish reasons for the size of the Stepney tribunal's task. One man pleaded that 'he was opposed to warfare, his parents having left Russia so that he should not be conscripted'.³⁴ The tribunal was unimpressed, using the fact that he was a tailor making khaki uniforms to ridicule his plea, but there can be little doubt that fear and hatred of military discipline were deeply rooted amongst Russian Jews whose forebears had suffered so atrociously in the Tsar's armies. Even the *Jewish Chronicle*, amid its patriotic propaganda, sympathised with the immigrants' 'inclination to regard military service from the typically Russian viewpoint – as something to be escaped from, at all costs'.³⁵ Religious objections were also common. Joining the army would inevitably mean breaking the Sabbath, eating non-kosher food, and committing hundreds of other trespasses. For the priestly Cohens, who were forbidden to look upon dead bodies, to engage in warfare was an act of sacrilege. It was the tribunal's task to decide whether such objections were genuine: an impossible task even when those sitting in judgement shared the same religion as the applicant, and a mere charade when they were ignorant of the laws and customs of that religion.

There is no shortage of evidence that the East London tribunals were prejudiced against Jewish applicants because they were Jewish and 'foreign', as well as because they did not want to fight. During the summer of 1916 resolutions were forwarded to the government from the Stepney and Bethnal Green tribunals condemning the privileged position of aliens who were being 'allowed to strengthen their industrial position without any sacrifice'.³⁶ Emotive talk of alien shirkers and alien job-snatchers sometimes occurred even while the tribunals were discharging their judicial functions.³⁷ Such remarks were seized upon and highlighted in the local press. The government's obvious indecision over the alien question encouraged the expression of extreme views. In June it was decided to permit the voluntary enlistment of friendly aliens. In July appeared the first official threat of deportation, if 'voluntary' recruiting failed. But the legal and practical difficulties of enforcing such a policy made the government hesitate. As the deadline for beginning repatriation was postponed from month to month, the publicity and ill-feeling surrounding the issue grew to a crescendo.

But the Jewish opponents of military service were also starting to organise and to produce their own, self-defensive propaganda. At the beginning of the war Rocker had bravely persisted in publicising his anti-war position to the Yiddish-speaking population through his newspaper, *Arbeter Frint*. Its forcible closure, and the trial of its journalists for an offence against the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A.),³⁸ coincided with the emergence of a far stronger anti-conscription movement in East London. On 7 July 1916 the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that the Home Secretary's statement on military service for aliens had produced 'a great deal of agitation'; 'numerous conferences' had been held to discuss the matter, and a protest meeting was planned. The outcome of this activity was the Foreign Jews Protection Committee (F.J.P.C.). It brought together representatives from 22 Jewish organisations, including seven socialist groups, 12 union branches, and various friendly societies.³⁹ During the year of its existence, the committee was to demonstrate the breadth of its support in the Jewish community by a ceaseless campaign of petitions, deputations and mass meetings.

The first action of the F.J.P.C. was to draw up a petition outlining its case, to be forwarded immediately to the government. The proposal to repatriate friendly aliens who refused to enlist was 'a grave issue':

However this may operate with regard to Italians, Frenchmen or men of other nationalities domiciled in this country, in the case of Jews born in Russia, who have taken refuge in this country from the unspeakable persecutions and hardships inflicted on them by the Russian government, the result can only be a violation of the right of asylum which has made Great Britain a nation honoured above all others . . . We cannot therefore do otherwise than place before you, Sir, the tragic impossibility of our position under the new proposals, and to ask that, if it is no longer possible for the British Government to regard us, as heretofore, as refugees and exiles, then to let us go forth to some other land where conditions so repugnant to humanity and justice will not be imposed upon us, and where we may be sorrowfully at peace.⁴⁰

The demands of this petition, and the manner in which they were expressed, reduced the *East London Observer* (and no doubt many of its readers) to a state of apoplectic fury. Herbert Samuel, the Anglo-Jewish Home Secretary, was equally unmoved. At the end of August he refused to receive an F.J.P.C. deputation, though it included the distinguished figure of Zangwill.⁴¹ Meanwhile the F.J.P.C. itself was going from strength to strength: by October it claimed to represent 120 organisations!⁴² Whilst this is probably an exaggera-

tion, evidence of the popularity of its views is provided by the shouting down of patriotic Jewish speakers at two large Whitechapel meetings.⁴³

By the end of the year it was obvious that voluntary recruiting had failed, despite the efforts of a special Russian Jewish Recruitment Committee, and despite added inducements such as free naturalisation after three months' service. Only a few hundred foreign Jews enlisted. The government would be obliged to act. Repatriation could not come quickly enough for many people in East London. Local tribunals continued to pass angry resolutions, local M.P.s harrassed the government in the House of Commons, and the editorials in the local press were more vitriolic than ever. In February 1917 the Bethnal Green tribunal instigated an East London conference on 'this obvious injustice'⁴⁴ which marked a climax of anti-alien hysteria. Delegates included Members of Parliament, councillors and tribunal members from every East London borough. Their demands for 'equal sacrifice' were familiar, but were expressed with extraordinary vehemence. The fact that so many leading figures in East London public life felt impelled to speak of the Jews in terms of open prejudice and hatred proves that the *East London Observer* was no isolated anti-semitic voice. The F.J.P.C. sent a telegram to the conference appealing 'to the chivalry of the English to defend them against insidious attacks'; the chairman refused to read it.⁴⁵

But Jewish appeals for understanding and support were not always so contemptuously cast aside, even at the height of the anti-alien witch hunt. The Russian revolution was to bring the supporters of the F.J.P.C. into close collaboration with British anti-war socialists. Predictably, fear of Jewish economic competition and envy of their privileged position with regard to military service were reflected to some extent in the organised labour movement. Yet, despite the patriotism of many union leaders, Jews won some sympathy for their case in the local trade union movement even before the revolution gave it a clearer political point. The Bethnal Green trades council backed up Jewish protests against discrimination in relief matters early in the war.⁴⁶ In February 1915 a London Trades Council resolution against the persecution of Jews in Russia was passed 'with only a few dissentients'. A major victory was achieved by East London Jewish delegates when, in July 1916, a special meeting on the aliens question decided to back the F.J.P.C. position. There was 'considerable discussion', but the majority was a substantial one (37 votes for, 19 against).⁴⁷

The F.J.P.C. expected most support from fellow-socialists. Among British socialists, as among trade unionists, there were divisions and some hostility, since attitudes towards the Jews were largely governed by attitudes towards the war itself. As the pro-war and anti-war factions of the British Socialist Party (B.S.P.) battled for control in 1914-16, the arguments of the latter became increasingly tinged with anti-semitism. An important reason was the fact that East London Jewish members played a role in the opposition to Hyndman. During 1915 letters in *Justice* from Hyndman and Victor Fisher portrayed the B.S.P. split as a movement of ill-educated East Enders, misled 'with all the acuteness of their race' by Jews: even Marx was criticised at one stage for his 'characteristic Hebrew detachment from national feeling'.⁴⁸ Although several important B.S.P. pacifists were Jewish (notably Joe Fineberg, of Stepney), the majority were not. However Jewish influence was very evident in the *Call*. By October 1916 at least thirteen East London newsagents were selling this anti-war B.S.P. paper,⁴⁹ and its editor, E. C. Fairchild, was in great demand as a speaker at Jewish meetings against military service.

The B.S.P.'s determined stand alongside the F.J.P.C. enabled it to build on the rather small and shaky Jewish membership it had established in East London before the war.

Other anti-war socialist groups had less direct connections in the area. Neither the Independent Labour Party nor Lansbury's *Herald* (based in neighbouring Poplar) gave entirely whole-hearted support to the Jews' 'right of asylum', despite their rejection of anti-semitism and dislike of conscription generally. Sylvia Pankhurst's increasingly socialistic Workers Suffrage Federation had not succeeded in setting up a Stepney branch in 1917. But Sylvia's devotion to her peace campaign in East London led her to identify strongly with the Jews who refused to fight. In February 1917 she too was speaking at F.J.P.C. rallies.⁵⁰

News of the Russian revolution reached East London barely three weeks after the Bethnal Green anti-alien conference. It is not surprising that Russian Jews led the first and most joyous celebrations. Though the new government's attitude to the war was not immediately clear, the immigrants instantly assumed that the revolution meant an end to racial persecution, and socialists looked forward to reconstructing a Russia at peace. On 24 March over seven thousand packed the great Assembly Hall in Mile End Road, and many others had to be turned away. Telegrams and messages of greeting were received from almost every Jewish trade union and labour organisation. Russian speakers shared the platform with Robert Williams, secretary of the National Transport Workers Federation, and Val MacEntee of the B.S.P.⁵¹ On the following day a routine meeting of the F.J.P.C. at Camperdown House became another mass rally to greet the revolution. Sylvia Pankhurst ridiculed government hopes that the Russian war effort would now improve: 'The Russian Revolution stood for the abolition of poverty, of wealth, and of rank, and to make men and women brothers and sisters'.⁵²

The *East London Observer's* first reaction, on the other hand, was that 'the momentous change in Russia removes once and for all the sententious objection to fight in the British army because England is the Ally of Russia'.⁵³ The government evidently shared this view, for it decided to press ahead immediately with a bill for enlistment or deportation. A deputation from the Bethnal Green conference was sympathetically received at the House of Commons during the week which followed the revolution, and a few days later Bonar Law publicly announced the government's intentions. The Bill on Alien Military Service was finally published in mid-May. 'Frantic opposition is being engineered by the Foreign Jews Protection Committee', reported the *Observer*.⁵⁴ A letter in the same issue, from F.J.P.C. secretary Abraham Bezalel, explains why. If military service was owed anywhere it was in Russia, not Britain; even those Russians who wished to leave voluntarily were finding it impossible to book passages, and in the case of those deported no arrangements were being made for the transport of wives and children; some areas from which foreign Jews came (including Bezalel's native Roumania) had not yet been liberated by the revolution, so that all the old objections to service still existed. Deaf to such protests, and fearful of anti-semitic disturbances, the government chose the following week for a massive police round-up of 'eligible aliens'. This action was a sop to the anti-semites⁵⁵ and bore some resemblance to official persecution. According to the *East London Observer*, over 600 men were temporarily detained. Nine were charged with not presenting themselves for military service, and a mere four eventually handed over to the military authorities.⁵⁶ When Sylvia Pankhurst investigated Jewish complaints of indiscriminate arrests and police violence, she found Whitechapel residents who put the number of those temporarily imprisoned as high as 4000. There was universal indignation and alarm.⁵⁷

The F.J.P.C. immediately took up the issue of the police raid. But, as the Aliens' Military Service Bill worked its way through Parliament, and East London suffered its

worst air raid of the war, it became clear that they were fighting a losing battle. They were refused permission to hold a protest meeting in the Great Assembly Hall.⁵⁸ Soon after, the same hall was the scene of a huge anti-alien demonstration organised by the British Workers League and attended by the Mayor of Stepney.⁵⁹ On 18 July the government announced that a convention had been made with the Russian government, arranging for friendly aliens either to join the British army or to be repatriated. The terms of the convention were publicised in East London by Yiddish wall posters.⁶⁰ Those who chose repatriation must apply for a passage at the nearest police station by 9 August, and be ready to leave 'at any time after August 13th'. All appeals for exemption must be made to a special tribunal by the end of August. The convention was not unexpected, but the prospect of its rapid legal enforcement threw the Jewish community into deeper turmoil. The worst blow was official confirmation of earlier fears that no transport to Russia would be offered to families. Even the *East London Observer* doubted the wisdom of this decision: 'Personally, we think it would be rather a good thing to get rid of the lot while the opportunity offers. Sooner or later this will have to be done. . . . They cannot be allowed to starve.'⁶¹

It was by no means clear who would prevent their starvation. The problem of the families was one of the main issues before a lengthy emergency F.J.P.C. conference summoned a week after the convention. Representatives of 67 Jewish organisations attended. Opposition to service in the British army proved as strong as ever. The F.J.P.C. announced that the Jews' 'main desire is to return to Russia with their families'. If they could not take their families they would be forced to stay, in which case 'we pledge ourselves to follow the glorious footsteps of the conscientious objectors'.⁶² The government was aware of the danger of organised resistance. At the beginning of August it took steps to extinguish the F.J.P.C. A detachment of police from Scotland Yard raided the Whitechapel Road headquarters of the committee. Piles of documents were seized, and Bezalel and another leader arrested. They were taken to Leman Street police station 'on a charge of conspiring to defeat the Military Service Act applied to aliens'.⁶³ By the end of the month, despite the protests of Israel Zangwill, Bezalel had been interned. He refused to give an undertaking as to his future conduct, and two months later was deported. This raid, and the enlistments and departures which soon began to follow, virtually finished the F.J.P.C. Only one more public meeting was held under its auspices, to protest against government plans for a separate Jewish regiment.⁶⁵ However, there was soon new evidence of how widespread its support had been. Over half of the eligible Russian Jews chose to return to Russia rather than fight in the British army. Ten thousand of those who remained applied to the special tribunal for exemption.⁶⁶

Owing partly to the continued resistance, and partly to the ever-increasing losses and hardships of the war, anti-alienism remained a powerful force in East London even after the new Military Service Act had removed one of the chief grievances. In September 1917 there occurred the most serious physical violence against the immigrants since the *Lusitania* riots. Between two and three thousand Jews and gentiles fought a pitched battle in Blythe Street and Teesdale Street, Bethnal Green. Accounts varied, but the cause of the disturbance was alleged by English witnesses to have been insulting remarks made by Russian tailors to a group of soldiers in a pub. 'All sorts of weapons were used – bars of irons, flat irons, logs of wood, and pistols', claimed one eye-witness. Police reports confirmed that the violence had been considerable (though no shots had been fired), and at least one well-armed Englishman appeared in the dock the next day.⁶⁷

Petty persecution and prejudice against foreign Jews were more widespread than ever

during the last year of the war. Every new problem was blamed on them in the local press and elsewhere. The Yiddish press consumed scarce newsprint; the aliens themselves wasted scarce food; the exodus of better-off aliens from the air raid danger zone to Maidenhead, Reading and 'Brightchapel' caused potential 'health problems' in those towns.⁶⁸ In February 1918 seventeen people died when thousands rushed to an air raid shelter, only to find the gates locked. Most of those involved were Jews. 'Cowardly Aliens in the Great Stampede' was the *East London Advertiser's* unsympathetic headline about the inquest report. Great prominence was given to the fact that one dead man was carrying more than £600 in his pocket, and also to police allegations that young alien men were responsible for the panic.⁶⁹

An excellent new pretext for anti-alien propaganda was provided by the stranded families of Russians who had chosen repatriation under the Convention. The government, having forced them to stay, tried hard to evade responsibility for their upkeep. Jewish labour organisations like the Workers Circle did their best to look after deported members' families; but many were soon forced into applying to the Jewish Board of Guardians for relief. On this occasion the Guardians' sense of economy triumphed over their patriotism – or perhaps patriotism indicated the unworthiness of such families. All relief was refused. The Guardians did, however, urge the families' case upon the government, which eventually agreed grudgingly to refund to the local Poor Law Authorities the cost of a minimal scale of assistance.⁷⁰ Even this concession failed to reduce local hostility to the Russian dependents. The *East London Observer* suggested repeatedly that 'concentration camps with strict rationing and regularised labour' would be a more suitable alternative. The Poor Law Authorities themselves joined in the protests. By April 1918 the Mile End Guardians were circulating a resolution against grants to Russian families. It received enthusiastic support from Stepney, Bethnal Green and Whitechapel. The St George's Guardians made their own complaint to the Local Government Board, claiming that extra administrative costs were falling on the ratepayers, and that the total cost was being inflated by cases of fraudulence.⁷¹

Meanwhile the old issue of military service for aliens was by no means exhausted. Jewish soldiers enjoyed a brief moment of glory in February 1918, when the first contingent of the Judeans (the all-Jewish regiment of the Royal Fusiliers) marched through the City and the East End before disembarking.⁷² They were greeted by the Lord Mayor from the balcony of the Mansion House, and by a fine array of local dignitaries (including a number of old enemies, such as the members of the Stepney tribunal) at the Pavilion Theatre. The Mayor of Stepney told them graciously that they would 'add lustre to the Jewish name'. The *Jewish Chronicle* waxed ecstatic at the sight of 'the spirit of Judas Maccabeus' hovering over the Whitechapel Road:

As these fine and soldier-like fellows stepped it to the strains of the music of a Guards Regiment they must have seemed to many to be trampling down in their progress a host of foolish fears and fictions. . . . In a short while a band of Jews – 'foreigners' and East End aliens, be it noted – from the workshop and factory, have been turned into a body of smart troops – looking, each one of them, every inch a soldier – and a hundred well-spun fables about the race have been blown into nothingness.

Such hopes were soon dashed. As the Russian Jewish soldiers were marching, the new Bolshevik government was concluding the peace of Brest Litovsk with the Germans. Nine days after the Judeans' march the British government announced that 'in present circumstances' it had decided to cease recruiting Russian subjects under the convention.⁷³ Soon

the press and public attacks on East End immigrants were once again in full swing. As the *Jewish Chronicle* commented sadly, 'the old difficulty that existed before the famous Anglo-Russian Convention has been revived'.⁷⁴ In fact, the military service situation was now more complicated than ever. At the end of March, the King's Bench Divisional Court ruled that the convention still existed, though the Russian Provisional Government had gone. The following week, less because of the court decision than because of the critical military situation, the government began to call up aliens once again, and the special tribunal recommenced work on the 5000 exemption claims still outstanding. Russian soldiers were to be sent to labour units or to the auxiliary services, rather than to the fighting line.⁷⁵ Such preferential treatment naturally confirmed every popular prejudice against Jewish shirkers. Despite a belated government decision to offer Russian soldiers the option of joining the Judeans instead, their anomalous status provided ammunition for anti-semites until the end of the war.

The development of contacts with British labour organisations continued to make some contribution towards the defence of the Jewish community, however. Though the Jewish trade unions remained relatively weak, they were stronger in 1918 than in 1914. Like other unions, they had been able to take advantage of war-time labour shortages and arbitration procedures to win wage increases and consolidate membership. The growth of mutual respect between Jewish and gentile unions was helped both by the strengthening of the former, and by the fact that Jews were beginning to join gentile unions in a variety of industries.⁷⁶ During the war the Jewish unions preserved their uniquely close links with the socialist movement. The development of joint activity between Jewish and British socialists, like the movement towards trade union co-operation, was a two-way process. After the Russian revolution the desire for closer links was strengthened on both sides, and joint political activity made rapid progress during the last eighteen months of the war. The B.S.P. was clearly in the strongest position to develop its organisation among East London Jews. Roots put down years earlier began to grow. Shortly after the revolution the Jewish Social Democratic Organisation decided to affiliate formally to the B.S.P. Joe Fineberg departed from his secretaryship of the Stepney B.S.P. branch to take up a post under the Bolshevik government.⁷⁷ But reports from the Stepney and Bethnal Green branches in the *Call* demonstrate that Jewish involvement remained high. Interestingly, Jewish Social Democrats were as hostile to proposals for a Palestinian homeland (revived by the Balfour Declaration of November 1917) as were the British members of the B.S.P. At the 1918 B.S.P. conference they condemned the scheme for 'raising false hopes and unrealistic aspirations amongst the Jewish workers', and thus obscuring 'the real issue of their class interests'. The only really effective way to fight anti-semitism was by linking the Jewish labour movement with those of other countries.⁷⁸

In May 1918 Fineberg was guest of honour at a dinner organised at the Old King's Hall by the Jewish Social Democrats. The dinner marked the centenary of Marx's birth, and among the 150 guests were representatives of the Workers Circle and various trade unions.⁷⁹ However by this time it was becoming increasingly difficult for Bolshevik sympathisers among the immigrant Jews to advertise their politics openly. Left-wing newspapers of all sorts were being frequently raided and suppressed under the D.O.R.A. regulations, and foreigners were particularly vulnerable. In March 1918 a new D.O.R.A. order prohibited aliens from addressing meetings and from 'engaging in propaganda'.⁸⁰ A new wave of arrests and deportations began. By the autumn the *Call* was accusing the government of 'a systematised offensive against Russians in this country suspected of sympathies with the New Russia of the Soviets':

Some of our comrades . . . were dragged out of bed in the middle of the night, given but a few moments to scrape together a few articles of clothing, and packed off for deportation without funds, with no opportunity of settling their personal and business affairs, or of preparing themselves against the severe climatic conditions now prevailing in the far North.⁸¹

This account is confirmed by a detailed description of the case of Mr T. Goldevitch in the anarchist journal *Freedom*. He was taken to Leman Street police station at 7.30 a.m. on 23 October, and held in custody until the following evening when, without his family, he was 'entrained for the ship'.⁸² Among those deported in October was the secretary of the Jewish Social Democratic Organisation. There was little the B.S.P. could do to defend its foreign members, since the legal position of British Bolsheviks was also precarious. But they did their best, and the spirited protests of the *Call* must have boosted its popularity with the remaining Jewish socialists.

Apart from the B.S.P. and the trade unions, Lansbury's Herald League also helped to bring Jewish and British workers together in 1917-18. A very active branch was established in Stepney in the aftermath of the Russian revolution. Its programme of meetings and activities appealed to a wider audience than that of the B.S.P., and reflected the interests of a largely Jewish membership. An extraordinary variety of speakers visited the branch meetings in the Jewish Capmakers Union Hall.⁸³ The Herald League was helping to lay the organisational as well as the educational foundations for the Stepney Labour Party. In November 1917 the League secretary wrote proudly that 'Stepney branch members seem to possess enough energy and evangelism to leaven the whole of the East End inhabitants'.⁸⁴ Soon afterwards the branch requested the help of the London Trades Council in forming a local trades council.⁸⁵ The inaugural meeting of Stepney Central Labour Party followed a few months later. 'A strong Committee of active trade union workers' was elected.⁸⁶ They included delegates from most of the Jewish unions, as well as from such major British unions as the Dockers, the Railwaymen and the General Workers. A Jewish secretary, Oscar Tobin, was chosen. The new party offered the prospect of Jewish and gentile political co-operation on a much larger scale than within any of the existing socialist groups.

Despite the unfavourable circumstances of the 1918 election, in Whitechapel the Labour Party candidate managed to run the sitting Liberal M.P. a close second. The 'coupon' Tory was beaten into third place. Whitechapel was the only East London constituency in which a Coalition candidate fared so badly. However it is only possible to guess at the role which the Jewish vote may have played in this result. Many Jews had no vote because of their alien status. Those who did vote were subject to conflicting pressures. Jews who had supported the war probably shared the general mood of loyalty to the Coalition government. The thousands who had opposed war had little reason to support a government which had so harassed the immigrant community over the military service question. Coalition candidates carefully avoided Jewish affairs in their election propaganda. The *East London Observer* failed in its attempt to make 'post-war alien problems' a major election issue.⁸⁷ Bloodthirsty attacks on the defeated Huns were commonplace, but (presumably because Jewish votes were in the offing) a great hush suddenly fell over the subject of friendly aliens settled in Britain. The *Jewish Chronicle* truly stated: 'There is no Jewish party, and there are no Jewish candidates, as such. Jews are to be found in all camps.'⁸⁸ The Whitechapel constituency aptly illustrates this fact. One of its Jewish candidates stood as a Coalition Unionist, whilst the other represented the Whitechapel

and Spitalfields Costermongers' Union, and was shortly after the election to become an enthusiastic supporter of the Labour Party.

Though the 1918 election provides no clear-cut pattern of Jewish voting, there was undoubtedly some correlation between social and political changes which had taken place during the war. In many ways war had emphasised the difference between the East London Jewish community and the surrounding population. Anti-semitism revived and flourished amid war-time crises and hardships. But on the other hand, war also contributed to the gradual process of integration of the foreign Jews into East London society. The growth of trade union and socialist organisations, to culminate in the launching of Stepney Labour Party, was only the most obvious sign of this. War had provided new economic opportunities within the ghetto which, as religious leaders were only too well aware, tended to undermine traditional customs and beliefs. Military service, whether enforced or voluntary, had abruptly removed thousands of young Jews from the ghetto's influence. In the British army they mixed with gentiles, made new friends, and learnt new ways. In January 1919 a Stepney rabbi produced a report on the need for post-war religious reconstruction which provoked an anxious correspondence in the *Jewish Chronicle*, vividly illustrating the war's effect on orthodox beliefs and behaviour.⁹⁰ Reverend Arthur Barnett, still serving as a Jewish army chaplain, wrote:

Generally speaking, I believe the effect of war on the Jewish soldier will have been to make him less Jewish in life and outlook. Men who before had lived a fairly Jewish life, will now, after these years of de-Judaising tendencies and influences, find it difficult to recover their faded Jewish consciousness. Army life had produced a sort of Jewish anaesthesia.⁹¹

Large numbers of Russian Jews had returned to their homeland after the 1917 revolution. They included not only internationalists and Bolshevik sympathisers, but also many traditionalists who had never wished to integrate into British society, having come to this country as refugees. Because of the war and the revolution, the stream of new arrivals, already restricted by the Aliens Act of 1905, was temporarily cut off altogether. Basically the political and social integration of the Jews in East London was caused by the fact that the foreign-ness of the ghetto could not outlive the original generation of immigrants. During the inter-war years the Jewish quarters of Stepney retained much of their exotic flavour, for the visiting gentile at least. But even before Hitler's bombs forced a mass exodus, enterprising young East London Jews were seeking wider horizons, trickling steadily up the 'north-west passage' out of Whitechapel into the English-speaking, English-living suburbs and beyond. Along with other traditions, the existence of separate Yiddish-speaking clubs, trade unions and political groups gradually became an anachronism. The halt to further immigration made Jewish integration inevitable in the long run. The First World War, despite the sound and fury of the anti-semites, probably helped rather than hindered it.

NOTES

- 1 W. Evans-Gordon, *The Alien Immigrant* (1903), 7.
- 2 Parliamentary Papers 1903, IX [Cd. 1742], *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration*, II, para. 289 (hereafter *RCAI*).
- 3 L. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England 1870-1914* (1960), 146.
- 4 C. Russell, and H. S. Lewis, *The Jew in London* (1900), 12.

- 5 *East London Advertiser*, 18 July 1914 (hereafter *E. L. Advertiser*).
- 6 *Jewish Year Book 1914* (1914).
- 7 Gartner, *op. cit.*, 228 and *RCAI*, paras 688–90.
- 8 *Jewish Chron.* 7 Aug. 1914.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Jewish Chron.* 11 Sept. 1914.
- 11 B. S. Straus at a Premierland show of war films, *East London Observer*, 1 May 1915 (hereafter *E. L. Observer*).
- 12 *E. L. Observer*, 12 Dec. 1914 and *E. L. Advertiser*, 19 Dec. 1914.
- 13 *E. L. Observer*, 29 Aug. 1914.
- 14 *Jewish Chron.* 16 Oct. 1914.
- 15 War Emergency Workers National Committee correspondence, box 26, file 4, item 70 (hereafter WNC 26/4/79).
- 16 WNC 26/4/81.
- 17 WNC 26/4/85 and 26/4/87.
- 18 Letter from I. Sharp to J. S. Middleton, 20 Oct. 1914, in Labour Party archives, LP/REL/14/212.
- 19 *Toynbee Record*, January 1915, quoted in *E. L. Observer*, 2 Jan. 1915.
- 20 Jewish Board of Guardians Minutes, 14 Oct. 1914.
- 21 *Jewish Chron.* 2 Apr. 1915.
- 22 Poor Jews Temporary Shelter, unpublished History, Chap. 36 and *Report 1914–15* (1915).
- 23 *E. L. Observer*, 15 Dec. 1914.
- 24 *E. L. Observer*, 2 Jan. 1915.
- 25 *E. L. Observer*, 15 May 1915.
- 26 *E. L. Advertiser*, 15 May 1915.
- 27 Jewish Board of Guardians *Report 1915* (1915).
- 28 *E. L. Observer*, 3 July 1915.
- 29 *Jewish Chron.* 29 Oct. 1915.
- 30 *E. L. Observer*, 1 Jan. 1916.
- 31 *E. L. Observer*, 18 Mar. 1916.
- 32 *E. L. Observer*, 1 Apr. 1916.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Jewish Chron.* 6 Oct. 1916.
- 36 *E. L. Advertiser*, 20 May 1916.
- 37 E.g. at Shoreditch tribunal *E. L. Observer*, 16 Sept. 1916.
- 38 R. Rocker, *The London Years* (1956), 318–21 and *E. L. Observer*, 5 Aug. 1916.
- 39 At first the F.J.P.C. was reluctant to publicise the names of its members, fearing victimisation. However a full list of names and organisations was sent to Sir Herbert Samuel after aspersions had been cast (by *Jewish Chron.* amongst others) on the representative nature of the Committee. The list was reproduced in *E. L. Observer*, 19 Aug. 1916.
- 40 *E. L. Observer*, 5 Aug. 1916.
- 41 *E. L. Observer*, 26 Aug. 1916.
- 42 *E. L. Observer*, 14 Oct. 1916.
- 43 *E. L. Observer*, 29 July and 14 Oct. 1916.
- 44 *E. L. Observer*, 27 Jan. 1917.
- 45 *E. L. Observer*, 3 and 10 Mar. 1917.
- 46 WNC 26/4/83.
- 47 London Trades Council Minutes, 10 Feb. 1915 and 27 July 1916.
- 48 *Justice*, 3, 10 and 24 June 1915.
- 49 *Call*, 5 Oct. 1916.
- 50 *E. L. Observer*, 10 Feb. 1917.
- 51 *Herald*, 31 Mar. 1917.

- 52 *E. L. Observer*, 31 Mar. 1917.
- 53 *E. L. Observer*, 24 Mar. 1917.
- 54 *E. L. Observer*, 19 May 1917.
- 55 The round-up was planned at a Home Office conference on the alien question to which local representatives of high position were invited, *E. L. Observer*, 17 Apr. 1917.
- 56 *E. L. Observer*, 26 May 1917.
- 57 *Workers Dreadnought*, 26 May 1917.
- 58 *E. L. Observer*, 2 and 9 June 1917.
- 59 *E. L. Advertiser*, 14 July 1917.
- 60 *E. L. Observer*, 21 July 1917.
- 61 *E. L. Observer*, 28 July 1917.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Jewish Chron.* 3 Aug. 1917.
- 64 *Jewish Chron.* 31 Aug. and 9 Nov. 1917.
- 65 *E. L. Observer*, 25 Aug. and 1 Sept. 1917.
- 66 *E. L. Observer*, 22 Sept. and 17 Nov. 1917.
- 67 *E. L. Observer*, 29 Sept. 1917.
- 68 *E. L. Observer*, 20 Jan. and 10 Feb. 1918.
- 69 *E. L. Advertiser*, 9 Feb. 1918.
- 70 Jewish Board of Guardians Minutes, 27 Sept. 1917 and correspondence in the Minute Book 27 Sept.–7 Dec. 1917.
- 71 *E. L. Advertiser*, 13 and 20 Apr. 1918.
- 72 *Jewish Chron.* 8 Feb. 1918.
- 73 *E. L. Observer*, 16 Feb. 1918.
- 74 *Jewish Chron.* 15 Mar. 1918.
- 75 *E. L. Observer*, 30 Mar. and 13 Apr. 1918.
- 76 Joint action by Jewish and gentile unions before the Committee on Production had also become common practice in the tailoring industry. This tangible co-operation is demonstrated by transcripts of cases on 6 June and 26 Sept. 1917, in the archives of the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers.
- 77 *Call*, 7 Feb. 1918.
- 78 B.S.P. *Annual Conference Report 1918* (1918), 13–14.
- 79 *Call*, 16 May 1918.
- 80 *E. L. Observer*, 9 Mar. 1918.
- 81 *Call*, 31 Oct. 1918.
- 82 *Freedom*, December 1918.
- 83 Speakers included members of the I.L.P., B.S.P., W.S.F. and Labour Party. Bertrand Russell spoke on 'How to Secure Economic Freedom', *Herald*, 16 Sept. 1917.
- 84 *Herald*, 8 Nov. 1917.
- 85 London Trades Council Minutes, 29 Nov. 1917.
- 86 *E. L. Observer*, 1 June 1918 and Stepney Labour Party *Annual Report 1919–20* (1920).
- 87 *E. L. Observer*, 23 Nov. 1918.
- 88 *Jewish Chron.*, 29 Nov. 1918.
- 89 Details of election candidates and results are reported in *E. L. Observer*, 4 Jan. 1919.
- 90 *Jewish Chron.* 31 Jan. 1919.
- 91 *Jewish Chron.* 28 Feb. 1919. Barnett's conclusions were based on his experience of ministering to East London Jews serving in labour units in France. To his horror, he found that his attempts to obtain a substitute for the daily bacon ration aroused protests among Jewish soldiers, who told him 'It's not so bad when you get used to it!'